



AZ Families News July 2024 - Fourth Edition

For our Fourth Edition of AZ Families News, we are excited to share recent news as well as updates on some of our 2024 initiatives.

On behalf of all DCS staff, thanks for reading. Stay cool by visiting your local library or going to the movies through these hot summer months. A NEW movie trailer is at the end of this newsletter!

David Lujan

David Lujan

CEO, Arizona Department of Child Safety (DCS)



Update on SSI Benefits for Children experiencing Foster Care

Last year, Arizona was the first state in the nation to create an initiative to safeguard the financial security of children and families.

This child-centered program ensures that children receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Retirement, Survivors, and Disability Insurance (RSDI) benefits are financially protected and supported.

Under the program, funds from SSI and RSDI are placed into **Personal Needs Accounts or ABLE** accounts. These accounts are designed specifically to manage the children's benefits, providing them a secure and stable financial foundation.

Program highlights include:

- Conserving all SSA funds, effective July 1, 2023, in accordance with House Bill 2559 which passed earlier this year.
- Providing transparency and education for SSA recipients and their families.
- Strengthening the economic capacity of parents and caregivers to care for their children effectively and safely when they return home.
- Enhancing reunification efforts by creating economic support around children and their families.

- Building an economic foundation for youth aging out of foster care.
- Creating savings accounts that will be owned by the child who is receiving SSA benefits.

By adopting this child-centered approach, DCS aims to ensure that every child's needs are met and their best interests are prioritized.

Finding Missing Children

In the last 12 months, DCS has seen a nearly 30% reduction in Arizona kids with a Missing, Abducted, Runaway (MAR) status.

The DCS Office of Child Welfare Investigations (OCWI) – a group of 130 DCS staff who focus on investigating felony child abuse and neglect – have contributed to this dramatic improvement.

The primary focus of OCWI is to conduct joint investigations with law enforcement when felony child abuse and neglect are suspected. Due to their established relationships with law enforcement, they are best able to assist in locating missing children as well.

OCWI has access to data that DCS field workers do not, as well as active partnerships with the US Marshals Service, the FBI and the Juvenile Probation Agency. These partnerships are often the key in being able to find missing children and youth.

The average number of days a child is on runaway status has also significantly decreased from 90 days to 29 days. OCWI Chief Edwin Wangler acknowledges the improvements, but also says he that would love to see that number continue to reduce. He says that it's helpful to have conversations with kids once they're recovered *“to find out whether they're running away from something or to something, so we can best support them and prevent future runaways.”*

MISSING * ABDUCTED * RUNAWAY (MAR)

In the past year...

**30% Reduction
in DCS children on
MAR Status**

**Average days DCS children
on MAR Status
reduced from 90 to 29**

Wangler's team also works with The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), a national organization that partners with DCS. The NCMEC serves as a national resource center on issues related to child victims, as well as missing and exploited children. They provide resources and technical assistance to law enforcement agencies at the federal, state, and local levels in cases involving missing and exploited children. Wangler credits the hard work of his OCWI colleagues, as well as partnerships with these outside agencies, with bringing so many missing children and youth home to safe environments.

In recent news, 2 children that went missing from DCS care were recovered after 6 years, having been abducted by their biological parents. You can read the US Marshals' account of this coordinated recovery [HERE](#).

There are currently 254 Arizona children listed as missing on the [NCMEC database](#).

Healthy Children

Mercy Care DCS Comprehensive Health Plan (DCS CHP) has made significant improvements over the last couple of years, consistently exceeding federal performance standards and Arizona's Medicaid health plan metrics. For calendar year 2023, DCS CHP's performance metric noted that greater than 85% of children and youth in care received their Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnostic and Treatment (EPSDT) wellness exam in accordance with EPSDT's schedule.

This number is something to be proud of, according to Dr. Sara Park, Chief Medical Officer of DCS CHP. Highlighting the important collaboration between

DCS Specialists creating IRRs and our newfound success, she adds that her team is excited about the positive metrics adding, “It’s vital to make sure kiddos receive their EPSDT services.”

Mercy Care DCS Comprehensive Health Plan

Arizona is the only state in the nation to integrate behavioral health and physical health service delivery under the umbrella of our child safety agency.

Arizona children entering care often need medical and dental care upon entry. DCS is responsible for providing medically necessary services for children in out-of-home care. The majority of children in state care receive health coverage through DCS CHP. Arizona is the only state in the nation to integrate behavioral health and physical health service delivery under the umbrella of our child safety agency.

The Integrated Rapid Response Referral (IRR) and assessment is part of a new procedure, first implemented in 2021. DCS Specialists play an integral role in activating health plan benefits and initiating an IRR so that a foster caregiver can quickly line up healthcare services to address any immediate behavioral and physical health needs of the child.

For Health Services information or health-related advice regarding children in DCS care, you may contact:

DCS CHP Nurse at chpnurse@AZDCS.gov

DCS CHP System of Care at chpsystemofcare@AZDCS.gov



When Superheroes Need Support

No one can deny the positive influence that a father can have in a child's life. In 2021, Edward Casillas saw an overwhelming need for fathers to have a source of support. In collaboration with DCS' Office of Prevention, Dad Together was created to help fathers gather, celebrate, share, encourage, and learn. In a phrase, it is "Dads helping Dads be Dads."

Dad Together is available to fathers, guardians, and expectant fathers from all backgrounds. The program is provided at no cost to the participants.

The program offers:

- 1:1 mentoring
- A safe space to connect with other dads, both in person and virtually
- 13-week Nurturing Fathers course

The Nurturing Fathers course teaches dads the basics of parenting and nurturing their children. Topics include child behavior management, conflict resolution, good co-parenting habits, and many more.

In the words of a Dad Together member: *"Dad Together is a transformative program, fostering deeper connections between fathers and their children . . . It has literally changed my life for the better, and I would recommend it to any father."*

The Dad Together program is available in Phoenix and Tucson through the Family Involvement Center. For more information, please visit <https://www.familyinvolvementcenter.org/help-me/fathers-program>.

2024 Initiative Updates

Maricopa Welcome Center to add On-site Health Clinic

Certificate of Occupancy has been issued. It is expected to open later this year.

Remodel/Refresh Pima Welcome Center

The refresh of the Pima Welcome Center is complete. Spaces have been made more interactive and kid friendly with a refresh of paint and new furniture.

DCS forms DEIA Committee

Leadership solicited applications and selected 16 representative staff members from around the state to create a roadmap and meet regularly to provide feedback and advice regarding DEIA initiatives. The committee chose the name "IDEAs."

Creating a Community Hub

This project is set to go live in July!

In conjunction with the Department of Economic Security (DES) and Pilgrim Rest Foundation, the Community HUB will be created in an effort to reduce the disproportionate representation of Black and African American children and families involved in the child welfare system. The HUB will connect families to culturally attuned and trauma-informed providers while also cultivating a culture of support instead of report, in the community. DCS aims to provide culturally congruent services that enable families to successfully navigate government agencies and programs as part of their efforts to address their needs, and to reduce the rates of disproportionality and disparity that exist in Arizona's child welfare system.

The Community HUB at Pilgrim Rest is designed to provide alternative intervention and prevention strategies for meeting the needs of the community and addressing the disproportionality of African American and Black children in the child welfare system. Since the Pilgrim Rest Foundation (PRF) is a known and

trusted source in the community, which already serves Black and African American families with wrap-around services, the implementation of the Community HUB pilot will be a natural extension of the work being done. This pilot program will be concentrated in specific zip codes where DCS historically has a high rate of intervention and removal of African American and Black children.

Extended Foster Care (EFC) Coaches Program

The new EFC Coaching Program launched in December 2023, with 6 providers and over 45 Coaches hired and trained. Statewide, 700 youth, ages 17 – 20, have been referred for the program. DCS is implementing this community-based program to help ensure that young people are prepared for their transition to adulthood at 18, and their exit from Extended Foster Care at age 21.

The EFC Success Coaches are facilitating youth-centered meetings where they are completing Transition Plans with these youth. Young people are enjoying the transition planning meetings, sharing comments such as, "I love how this meeting is going!" We look forward to seeing how this new intervention program will support our youth in achieving their goals.

Kinship Support Services (KSS)

Our new Kinship Support Services are being met with much success!

Since beginning these new services, 1,539 families have been referred for services. Of those families, our Office of Licensing and Regulation (OLR) has 609 pending applications for licensure and 18 new kinship families have become licensed.

The first four families that became licensed under these new services did so in under 60 days.

Services Provided to Kinship families include:

- An expedited path to foster care licensing
- Home assessments
- Creation of a family support plan
- Initial and ongoing trainings
- Assistance with enrolling a child in school and other educational needs

We look forward to continued gains in this area. Children thrive when surrounded by supportive families.

Summertime Movie Recommendation



Sound of Hope: The Story of Possum Trot is the true story of Donna and Reverend Martin and their church in East Texas. 22 families adopted 77 children from the local foster system, igniting a movement for vulnerable children everywhere.

Safety · Accountability · Change · Family · Engagement · Compassion · Teaming · Advocacy · Equity

About the CEO: David Lujan is the CEO of the Arizona Department of Child Safety. David brought over two decades of child welfare advocacy experience to the Department when he assumed the Director position in April 2023. David is an attorney who earned his Juris Doctor degree from the Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law at Arizona State University. He ran for elected office in 2004 and served as a state

representative from 2004 to 2010 and as a state senator from 2011 to 2013. During this time, David helped launch Defenders of Children, a non-profit organization that provides free legal representation to abused children and adult victims of domestic violence. As staff attorney for the organization, he worked with Arizona's and Utah's attorney generals to open the first non-profit in Colorado City to provide legal services to victims of child abuse. David joined Children's Action Alliance in 2017 to launch its affiliate, the Arizona Center for Economic Progress, and serve as its first Executive Director. In this role, he worked to advance policies at the State Capitol to improve economic opportunities for all Arizonans.

About the Arizona Department of Child Safety: Our mission is to successfully partner with families, caregivers, and the community to strengthen families, ensure safety, and achieve permanency for all Arizona's children through prevention, services, and support. As highly motivated and caring public servants, the DCS team is committed to fulfilling this mission with excellence, providing safety and well-being for the most vulnerable population in Arizona - our children. If you suspect child abuse, call 888-SOS-CHILD.



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